



Early Years Strategy Submission

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Introduction

Good vision is extremely important for children as it has a fundamental role in their safety, learning, growth and overall development. Our visual system develops in early childhood. Any vision problems that are not corrected during this critical period lower the child's visual potential. Furthermore, vision lost early in life cannot always be regained as the effects of treatment and intervention rapidly decline beyond this period. Critically, young children with impaired vision rarely complain as they do not necessarily understand that they cannot see well. Vision problems may therefore go undetected and become an impediment to their academic, emotional and social development affecting their overall wellbeing. Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children from culturally and linguistically diverse families, may be at greater risk of undetected vision problems for a number of reasons including barriers in accessing healthcare. This inequity needs to be proactively addressed as all Australian children regardless of their location, background or socio-economic position, should have the best possible vision and conditions for unimpeded growth, development and future opportunities.

Eye disorders are one of the most common long-term health problems experienced by Australian children, costing the health care system \$542M each year. We also know that vision loss has life-long implications. In a study completed in 2016, Deloitte Access Economics found that those living with severe vision loss are 50% less likely to be employed than the general population. This highlights the benefits of early detection and treatment of eye disorders. It further demonstrates the importance of timely access to essential supports and interventions for children with blindness or low vision which helps these children reach their potential by being able to fully access and engage at school and with the community.

Vision 2020 Australia, the national peak body for the eye health and vision sector, together with our members, have identified three key initiatives that strongly aligns with the objectives of the Early Years Strategy. Firstly, our sector believes vision screening for all preschool aged Australian children will help with early detection and intervention for eye and vision problems. Our sector identified high variance and inequity in existing vision screening systems for young children across different jurisdictions. To this end, we developed the National Framework for Vision Screening for 3.5-5-year-olds (Attachment A), which is the culmination of the collaborative work of field experts from the vision and eye health sector. The Framework aims to facilitate universal access to integrated and person-centred eye care in alignment with the United Nations General Assembly resolution, 'Vision for everyone: Accelerating action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals'. Drawing on the highly successful Statewide Eyesight Preschooler Screening (StEPS) program in New South Wales, the Framework provides overarching principles, minimum standards and recommended practices for maximising reach, workforce training, follow up care and data management. It thus provides states and territories with a robust and nationally united foundation for vision screening in young children.

Secondly, limitations in the current NDIS Early Childhood Early Intervention Pathway mean that many children who are blind or have low vision are missing the critical window of early access to supports and intervention. These limitations can be rectified by addressing knowledge gaps about vision loss and streamlining pathways for children who are blind or have low vision.

Thirdly, the benefits of early childhood education are becoming increasingly apparent and supported with the introduction of subsidised three-year-old kindergarten. For children who

are blind or have low vision, early childhood education may require additional and/or targeted approaches to improve accessibility. As such, applying the Expanded Core Curriculum to early childhood education will remove barriers for these children, ensuring educational opportunities on par to children without disability.

Vision 2020 Australia and our members recommend that the Early Years Strategy incorporates the National Framework for Vision Screening in 3.5-5year-olds and pursues collaboration with our sector to improve access and education for children with vision loss. Doing so will ensure that all Australian children have equal opportunities to reach their potential and succeed in school and beyond.

Response to Consultation Questions

Q1 Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

N/A

Q2 What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

The vision for Australia's youngest children should focus on equitable access to good health and education. Vision 2020 Australia and our members firmly believe that vision and eye health is a core component of good health, and essential to fulfilling education and allowing children to reach their full potential.

Q3 What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

The outcomes most important to include in the Strategy should address four areas that are fundamental to providing the best start to life for our youngest children:

1. Health: good physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing.
2. Safety: physically and emotionally safe and stable home and learning environments.
3. Relationships: strong and supportive relationships at home and school, and strong community and cultural connections.
4. Opportunities: inclusive and engaging opportunities that foster learning and development.

Q4 What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

Vision 2020 Australia and our members recommend that the Strategy prioritises inclusive access to eye care, early intervention and education for all young children by adopting the following three initiatives:

1. National Vision Screening Framework for 3.5-5-year-olds

As mentioned above (see Introduction and Attachment A) the Framework will help harmonise children's vision screening programs, address current inequities of access, and promote early detection of vision problems. Undetected vision disorders can lead to the development of amblyopia (lazy eye). Amblyopia is a leading cause of vision loss in children, and it occurs when the eye(s) experiences a prolonged lack of clear vision in the early years of life, caused by disorders including a misaligned/turned eye and refractive error (short-sightedness, long-sightedness, astigmatism). It is essential to treat amblyopia as soon as possible because the treatment effect diminishes as the child grows and their eyes and visual system mature. Late treatment, or failure to treat leads to irreversible vision loss with lifelong consequences. Eye disorders including amblyopia and refractive error can be difficult to identify in young children because they do not understand that they cannot see well, hence the importance of early and effective universal vision screening for young Australian children.

The Framework also serves as a proactive measure against the coming 'myopia epidemic'. Myopia (short-sightedness) is one of the most common eye conditions, reducing our ability to see in the distance. Worldwide prevalence of myopia is rising with more than 1 in 2 people

expected to be affected by 2050, hence posing a serious global public health concern. Increasingly, Australian children will be impacted as time using screens increases and time spent outdoors decreases— two factors associated with the development of myopia. Myopia can occur at any age and early detection in children is highly important for two key reasons. Firstly, correcting myopia can be simple and cheap with a pair of spectacles or contact lenses sufficient to provide good vision. Secondly, early interventions to slow myopia progression can prevent high myopia in adulthood. Sight-threatening complications including retinal detachment, glaucoma and macula disease can occur with high myopia later in life.

2. Streamline NDIS access for children with vision loss

For children who are blind or have low vision, it is vital that supports be introduced as soon as possible. Currently, system settings for the NDIS Early Childhood Early Intervention Pathway mean many children do not receive timely access to supports because:

- Diagnostic criteria for vision loss are strict. Diagnosis can be difficult for vision conditions at an early age, and conditions which will lead to deterioration in vision are not easy to diagnose;
- The eligibility criteria of developmental delay are not easily demonstrated in young children; and
- Knowledge regarding available vision supports and the capacity to select the ideal approach for each child is inconsistent among NDIS planners and assessors.

Guided by the current system that helps children with hearing loss have early access to vital supports, our sector urges a similar approach for children who are blind or have low vision. Doing so will critically help reduce developmental delay and improve educational and social outcomes. In alignment with the Strategy's 'respectful inclusivity' objective, we recommend the Strategy consider the development and use of:

- Reference packages to guide NDIS planners and assessors in providing crucial Early Intervention supports to children entering the scheme,
- A streamlined access pathway for children with vision loss, which ensures children receive supports as soon as possible following recognition of vision concerns, and
- A funded pathway for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to host or employ relevant assessors to support Aboriginal children and families and ensure culturally appropriate services.

3. Ensure education is accessible for students who are blind or have low vision

Children who are blind or have low vision should have the same access to early childhood education as those without disability. However, children who are blind or have low vision can encounter barriers to learning and may require a set of disability-specific skills to be able to fully access and engage with the early learning frameworks and curriculum.

The Expanded Core Curriculum identifies key areas where students can benefit from additional, targeted education by qualified specialist educators. Research suggests that students who have been taught using its methodology enjoy better outcomes later in life. Implementing the Expanded Core Curriculum through the Early Years Strategy will ensure children who are blind or have low vision receive an early education equivalent to their peers with life-long benefits including equal access to opportunities in adulthood.

Q5 What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Children living in vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances face greater barriers across all aspects of life. Improving equity for these children requires provision of services with adequate coverage and ensuring they are culturally appropriate. Disadvantaged children will also benefit from being offered regular opportunities to access targeted programs and interventions.

These approaches are reflected in Vision 2020 Australia's National Framework for Vision Screening in 3.5-5-year-olds, and are an effective way to help reduce the outcome disparity for children born and raised in difficult circumstances:

1. Screening should be provided across a wide array of organisations to maximise coverage, including but not limited to ACCOs, refugee services, and immunisation clinics.
2. Guardians of children who have missed a screening should receive targeted screening invitations, with simultaneous distribution of accessible written information about children's vision and the importance of screening (provided in all commonly spoken languages in Australia).
3. Secondary clinics/catch up clinics should be offered for children who were unable to be tested or missed the initial screen. The exemplary New South Wales StEPS Program reported a screening rate ~20% higher in areas where catch up clinics were offered.
4. Testing procedures and equipment should be adapted to the local area and cultural groups. For example, the 'Koori MIST' is a culturally adapted training and testing kit designed for checking vision of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. It is based on the Melbourne Initial Screening Test, which is a quick vision screening test for children between 3.5-4.5 years.

This is a highly worthy investment to make in the early years of a child's life with long-term gains for the individual, their family and the health system.

Q6 What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

Coordination of services and a collaborative approach to policy development is vitally important and even more so for under-represented children and their families, including children who are blind or have low vision. Streamlining NDIS access for children with vision loss represents a key opportunity for the Commonwealth to improve access and educational outcomes for children who are blind or have low vision. It also demonstrates a commitment to address current system failures that are disadvantaging an already vulnerable group of young children.

Vision 2020 Australia recommends the NDIA work with the eye health and vision care sector to develop the reference packages and pathways (see response to Q4) that will help remove current impediments to early intervention supports that are crucial for children with vision loss. This collaboration between the Commonwealth and our sector will be immensely important to improve the lives and long-term outcomes for young children with vision loss and their families.

Q7 What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The Strategy should be guided by high-level principles centred around equity and inclusion, for example:

- Development and evaluation of the Strategy and its outcomes should be in collaboration with and informed by the expectations and lived experience of children and their families.
- Affirmative action that prioritises under-represented children and/or children from disadvantaged families and backgrounds

In terms of principles to guide the health and educational aspects of the Strategy Vision 2020 Australia recommends the inclusion of the United Nations General Assembly resolution of 'vision for everyone'.

Q8 Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

N/A

About Vision 2020 Australia

Vision 2020 Australia is the national peak body for the eye health and vision care sector. Working with and representing almost 50 member organisations, we focus on supporting policy and funding changes to prevent avoidable blindness, enhance eye care delivery, and better meet the needs of people who are blind or living with low vision. Our members span a wide range of areas and engage in local and global eye health and vision care, health promotion, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance, and community support. This means that the work we do in developing the sector, supported policy and advice, brings a diverse range of expertise and perspectives to bear. The perspectives and experiences of both service users and providers are at the heart of our work. Avoidable blindness and vision loss in Australia, and our region, can be prevented and treated by working in partnership across government, non-government, private and community sectors. People of all ages who are blind or vision impaired will benefit from these partnerships, with improved access to services that support their independence and community participation.

For further information about this submission, please contact Vision 2020 Australia via email policy@vision2020australia.org.au.